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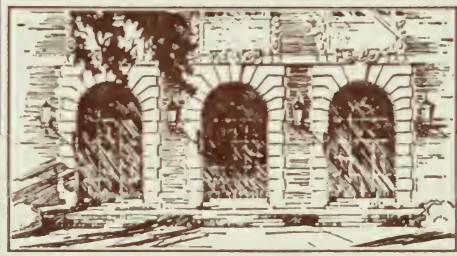
Lois Hartley.
Spoon River Revisited.


(1963)

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SPOON RIVER REVISITED



Lois Hartley

BALL STATE MONOGRAPH

NUMBER ONE

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When Benjamin De Casseres wrote of *Spoon River Anthology*, "I do not know of any poetic fiction that gives me such an odor of reality, such a raw, rank taste of broken hearts and battered brains, such a sense of inexorable fatality,"¹ he caught much of the essence of Edgar Lee Masters' most famous book, and he also suggested some of the factors which made *Spoon River Anthology* so startling at the time of its publication.

At the beginning of the second decade of the twentieth century, American poetry was characterized by a weak and imitative Victorianism.² American poets echoed Tennyson, Swinburne, Dobson, and others, but their imitations did not rise to the level of their models. Although William Vaughn Moody and Edwin Arlington Robinson were writing some excellent poetry, much American verse was undistinguished. The public was not particularly interested in poetry and confined its reading to the classics and to "pretty" poems. However, at least as early as 1912, a new movement began when Harriet Monroe founded and became first editor of *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*. By the time that Edgar Lee Masters began to write the "new" poetry, others had already gained prominence in the poetry revival. Amy Lowell's *A Dome of Many-Coloured Glass* (1912) contained her first imagist pieces. Vachel Lindsay gained sudden fame with *General William Booth Enters into Heaven* (1913). In England, an American poet, Robert Frost, published *A Boy's Will* (1913). Meanwhile, Carl Sandburg and others published free verse poems in *Poetry*. But no other book of poetry achieved the phenomenal success of Masters' *Spoon River Anthology*. No other became a best-seller in the present sense of the word. No other created nation-wide, in fact, international, controversy. And few books have arrived at a more opportune time. In 1914 America evinced perhaps an unusually high degree of complacency, materialism, and narrow morality. *Spoon River Anthology* gave a much-needed shock to a large portion of the American reading public. Many read the book, and many others heard about it and argued about it from hearsay. Forty-eight years later it is almost impossible to imagine the impact with which it arrived on the American scene.

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Immediately after the publication of *Spoon River Anthology* in 1915, it became "the most read and most talked-of volume of poetry that had ever

¹ "Five Portraits on Galvanized Iron," *The American Mercury*, IX (December, 1926), 395.
² In regard to Masters' place in the poetry revival, see William Van Wyck, "Edgar Lee Masters and Twentieth Century Prosody," *The Personalist*, XVIII (January, 1937), 75-80.

been written in America."³ During the first excitement of its appearance, it was read for various reasons by different groups.⁴ Those who knew classical poetry were amused and interested by the combination of an old Greek form with Illinois material. Those who disapproved of the hollowness of much current poetry liked the grimness and concreteness of *Spoon River Anthology*. Many who usually avoided poetry read it because it had "punch." Some read it to object to its picture of the small town. Others read it for novelty or for shock or for a taste of what everyone else seemed to be reading. Some found it queer or original; many disliked the philosophy; but few noticed the idealism, the god-seeking, the humor running throughout the book.

Spoon River Anthology begins with a free verse lyric suggested by the ballade formula of François Villon. The question is, "Where are Elmer, Herman, Bert, Tom and Charley"⁵ and all the other Spoon River villagers? The refrain, with variations, is "All, all are sleeping, sleeping, sleeping on the hill." The hill is, of course, the graveyard of the village of Spoon River. This introductory poem using the *ubi sunt* formula has a homely beauty and opens the book on an appropriate note. It introduces us to characters we shall learn more of later. We find that we shall meet not kings and nobles but boozers, brawlers, simple people, frustrated ones, rich and poor. We shall read of Fiddler Jones, "Who played with life all his ninety years," and of Major Walker, who talked "With venerable men of the revolution."⁶

In the first edition of *Spoon River Anthology*,⁷ which appeared in April, 1915, "The Hill" was followed by 212 epitaphs in the form of short monologues. After publication of the first edition, Masters continued to write epitaphs. He had been hindered from making the book as long as he wished by such factors as his busy career as a lawyer, his wife's and friends' eagerness to see the epitaphs in book form, and his physical exhaustion. When he sent the poems to the Macmillan Company for the first time, he omitted many stories that he might have used; and he began to write more poems for a definitive edition, published in November, 1916. The definitive edition contained thirty-two poems not printed in the 1915 volume.⁸ "The new epitaphs

³ Percy H. Boynton, "The Voice of Chicago—Edgar Lee Masters and Carl Sandburg," *Some Contemporary Americans* (Chicago, 1924), p. 52.

⁴ The analysis of readers is adapted from *ibid.*, pp. 52-53.

⁵ *Spoon River Anthology* (New York, 1946), p. 1. All references will be to this edition, unless otherwise stated.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁷ New York, 1915. Dedicated to Mrs. Masters.

⁸ "Herman Altman," "Justice Arnett," "Robert Southey Burke," "John Cabanis," "Jeremy Carlisle," "Ida Chicken," "Dippold the Optician," "Batterton Dobyns," "Wallace Ferguson," "Anthony Findlay," "Harry Carey Goodhue," "Constance Hatley," "Jonathan Houghton," "Scholfeld Huxley," "Dr. Siegfried Iseman," "Plymouth Rock Joe," "Voltaire Johnson," "Kinsey Keene," "Judge Selah Lively," "Paul McNeely," "Andy the Night-Watch," "Isa Nutter," "Schroeder the Fisherman," "Sexsmith the Dentist," "Conrad Siever," "Lois Spears," "Judson Stoddard," "English Thornton," "Eugenia Todd," "Rebecca Wasson," "Charles Webster," and the "Epilogue." These are scattered throughout the volume.

correct the overloading of sensationalism in the first form of the chronicle. Most of these speakers have kept the faith; some of them welcome 'freedom from the earth sphere' after a lifetime of battle to be strong and true."⁹ Following the epitaphs is a blank verse poem called "The Spooniad." It was supposedly written by one of the inhabitants of Spoon River, Jonathan Swift Somers, and is a fragment of a projected twenty-four book epic in mock-heroic style. It tells of a village quarrel in Spoon River, but the mock-heroic lines echo the Greek epics, Shakespeare, and even Omar Khayyám. The final poem in the book is the rhymed "Epilogue," composed of dialogue by such characters as Beelzebub, Loki, Yogarindra, the Sun, the Milky Way, Infinite Depths, and many Voices. Its philosophy is that of the rest of the book, but its form is much less successful than that of the preceding poems.

The characters in the book are the villagers whose names form the titles of the 243 verse monologues. Since one epitaph, "William and Emily," is that of two people and since another is that of "Many Soldiers," there are actually 243 individuals plus "Many Soldiers." They do not include all the inhabitants of this Middle Western graveyard. The people in the *Anthology* mention others lying nearby or others who acted in relation to them in life, and these others do not always have epitaphs. Hod Putt, for example, lies near Bill Piersol's grave, but Piersol has no epitaph. The *Anthology* contains only those who gave the community individuality, most of whom were a part of town gossip. Many of the poems grew out of talks between Masters and his parents and out of incidents which he observed in Petersburg and Lewistown. Obviously each citizen in towns of several thousand could not be described. The people whom Masters remembered and who became the basis for epitaphs were those conspicuous in some way. The idea of using Spoon River poems to show the macrocosm was probably not in Masters' mind when he wrote the first epitaphs. Originally he may not even have intended them to be representative of a community. William Marion Reedy and Eunice Tietjens, one of the editors of *Poetry*, suggested that Masters was scarcely serious about the early epitaphs.¹⁰ After they received overwhelming approval, he deliberately added a more "spiritual" element and tried to make them more representative of his own philosophy and also of a whole community.

⁹ Willard Thorp, "The 'New' Poetry," *Literary History of the United States* (Robert E. Spiller et al., editors; New York, 1948), p. 1180.

¹⁰ *The World at My Shoulder* (New York, 1938), p. 45. Marjorie Eileen Fox, "William Marion Reedy and the St. Louis *Mirror*," p. 71, quotes Reedy's comment in the *Mirror* on August 20, 1915: "First, half piqued at my rejection of his efforts in the accepted verse forms, he hurled at me three of the poems, with a satiric query that perhaps this was what I liked. I printed them. He was surprised, half suspected I was guying him. Then he kept on sending them, three or four, again maybe a dozen, week by week, not always typewritten, often done in pencil in no very attractive chirography."

At least sixty-seven of the verse epitaphs are, by Masters' count, both metrical and rhythmical.¹¹ The first third of the book "required a practiced voice or eye to yield the semblance of verse," but the "last two-thirds, or nearly so, accommodated itself to the less sensitive conception of the average reader. The prosody was allowed to take care of itself under the emotional requirements and inspiration of the moment."¹² In some poems he combined various conventional measures, such as dactyls and trochees, but did not use rhyme. Until 1914 he had read Homer each spring, and he felt that the form and spirit of Greek epical poetry had influenced his own style. This opinion is questionable. Most critics now agree at least that the epitaphs were not prose, although Masters was not a lyricist.¹³

Perhaps Masters' free verse rhythms are not especially subtle, but his seriousness, ironic humor, and power are transmitted through the simple rhythms, and through the terse, unadorned statement. The poems are not memorable for striking metaphor, subtle cadences, or imaginative diction. They are memorable for insight into ordinary lives; they are memorable because the speakers seem to be speaking the truth.

Few men have been able to put so much honest feeling, so much irony and yet so much sympathy into a few lines. Most of the epitaphs are no more than fifteen or twenty lines in length, and some are shorter. Each covers one situation or one motif in the life of the speaker. In only a few poems, such as "Lucinda Matlock," is the attempt made to survey a whole life. An episode is described, or a philosophy is sketched. Thus the essential character of the speaker is revealed.

Approximately twenty stories are told through interrelated poems. One episode may be described from different points of view, or a husband and a wife may explain in different ways why they were unhappy together. In a few monologues the speaker reveals more of some other person in the graveyard than he does of himself. In "Father Malloy" the life of a priest is described by a voice other than his own. In fact, Father Malloy does not even lie on the Hill but is in a Catholic cemetery. Except for a few characters who recur in a number of epitaphs, men like Thomas Rhodes and A. D. Blood, no one holds a more prominent place than another. Each speaks once; each lies in the cemetery; each speaks unemphatically. No matter how tragic or lurid the essential episode in the life of a person may have been, his voice

¹¹ Masters, "The Genesis of Spoon River," *The American Mercury*, XXVIII (January, 1933), 49.

¹² Masters, "To William Marion Reedy," *Toward the Gulf* (New York, 1918), p. ix. This introduction, by Masters himself, is one of the best sources of material on his verse form in *Spoon River Anthology*.

¹³ For an analysis of Masters' free verse see Amy Lowell, *Tendencies in Modern American Poetry* (Boston, 1931), pp. 179-183.

from the grave is calm, sometimes secretive. Most of the speakers do not know more than they knew in life; if they have found out anything about immortality, they seldom hint at such knowledge. They are concerned chiefly with what happened to them before death. Some of them keep their old delusions, but they are entirely honest, while formerly they might have been hypocritical. If they feel that they learned anything from life, they may present it in a tag at the end of the poem or in an introductory sentence.

The inhabitants include bankers, reformers, lawyers, judges, druggists, teachers, carpenters, prostitutes, poets, doctors, housewives, soldiers, day laborers, lunatics, actresses, cardsharps, fiddlers, deacons, dentists, farmers, invalids, butchers, chaplains, fishermen, scientists, soldiers. The list could be extended. Only a few small-town occupations, such as the cobbler, the miller, the tailor, the barber, are omitted. Masters attempted to include the omitted occupations in *The New Spoon River* (1924). For the most part, the inhabitants are Anglo-Saxon, but one notices a few such names as Cabanis, Russian Sonia, and Yee Bow. The Germans are probably the largest non-British group.

Through the epitaphs we learn something about the landscape of the town, but the description is general. There are a court house, several churches, a canning factory, a brewery, Bindle's Opera House, Trainor's Drug Store, fine houses and shabby ones. The town centers around a square, as do many Middle Western villages. The surrounding countryside has many small, run-down farms, but it has also very prosperous estates. Masters was not interested, however, in depicting the physical details of the town. Instead, he concentrated on the spirit of the community and on the minds of the characters.¹⁴

These characters fall into several groups. Louis Untermeyer divides them thus: "In the first of these we have the power of plain statement, usually heightened by a matter-of-fact humor; the second and largest division has disillusion as its motive; the third lifts both statement and disillusion to a plane of exaltation."¹⁵ The first group includes such portraits as "Roscoe Purkapile," "Mrs. Purkapile," "Russian Sonia," "Penniwit, The Artist," "Barney Hainsfeather," and "Daisy Fraser." The humor is sometimes ironic, as in the case of "Archibald Higbie" and "Perry Zoll." Daisy Fraser, the village prostitute, laughs broadly, while Archibald Higbie is too much discouraged by his failure as an artist to be much amused by the joker in his career. The bulk of the poems in *Spoon River Anthology* belong to the

¹⁴ The Limited Editions Club (New York) published an edition of *Spoon River Anthology* in 1942. Illustrations were by Boardman Robinson, who attempted to show the physical appearances of Masters' Spoon River characters.

¹⁵ *American Poetry Since 1900* (New York, 1942), p. 119.

second group, examples of which include "Margaret Fuller Slack," "'Indignation' Jones," "Editor Whedon," "Enoch Dunlap," "Albert Schirding," and "Jonas Keene." One of the most bitter poems is "Enoch Dunlap," the epitaph of a politician who dedicated himself to the service of the people but was cursed by them. In 1915 its conclusion was considered particularly sordid and shocking. The irony of this second group is the dominating element of the *Anthology*. To show Masters' command of a bitter irony, one can scarcely choose better examples than the portraits of "Albert Schirding" and "Jonas Keene." Schirding reared splendid children and felt that he could not live up to their accomplishments; his feeling of unworthiness eventually caused his suicide. Keene killed himself too, but he did so because none of his children brought him honor. He could not understand why Albert Schirding destroyed himself. Most of the poems of this group convey the tragedy of wasted lives.

8 As one progresses through the last half of *Spoon River Anthology*, he continues to meet many people who were considered unsuccessful in life, but they tend more and more to be spiritually victorious. This third group includes the famous portrait "Anne Rutledge," but more representative are "Emily Sparks," "Hare Drummer," "Doc Hill," and "Lucinda Matlock." Among these epitaphs are "some of the most condensed pieces of poignance that contemporary literature offers."¹⁶

Masters made a similar division of his poems when he said, "the fools, the drunkards, and the failures came first, the people of one-birth minds got second place, and the heroes and the enlightened spirits came last, a sort of Divine Comedy."¹⁷ Too often the critics of the *Anthology* ignore the last group and thus have a false opinion of the tone of the whole book.

Fred Lewis Pattee said, "To live in a town peopled by these two hundred and forty-four would be intolerable."¹⁸ Whether or not one agrees with this statement, it is generally held that *Spoon River Anthology* is an adverse criticism of the small town. Until its publication the village had usually been treated as an ideal place in which to live, as a beautiful rural setting for unique "characters" and pure love. A few attempts had been made to give a more realistic picture. E. W. Howe's *The Story of a Country Town* (1883), Clarence Darrow's *Farmington* (1905), and Mark Twain's *The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg* (1900) are in this group of predecessors. Perhaps it is significant that Clarence Darrow was a law partner of Masters from 1903 to 1911 and that Masters must have read *Farmington*. Carl Van

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

¹⁷ "The Genesis of Spoon River," p. 50.

¹⁸ *The New American Literature, 1890-1930* (New York, 1930), p. 288.

Doren said that Masters "did little more than to confirm these mordant neglected testimonies,"¹⁹ but he used free verse where others had used prose.

If one takes *Spoon River Anthology* as a picture of village life, he finds various aspects portrayed. Minor village rivalries as well as major ones, narrowness in such areas as religion and literature, lack of social justice, greed, the bitterness of those frustrated by the village way of life are in such epitaphs as "Serepta Mason," "Harry Carey Goodhue," "Minerva Jones," "Nellie Clark," "Editor Whedon," and "Oak Tutts." Many have called Masters' picture of the village one-sided, have said that it emphasizes the shabbiness too much and is far from typical. They find justification in the number of violent deaths, sexual maladjustments, and frustrations. On the other hand, it has been estimated that not more than sixty-five or seventy of the epitaphs are spoken by "unpleasant" characters.²⁰ Certainly Masters did not ignore the admirable village types. "Fiddler Jones" and "Lucinda Matlock" are joyous epitaphs. "Isaiah Beethoven" died triumphantly. There is an exultant tone in "Father Malloy," "Lydia Humphrey," "Arlo Will," and "Joseph Dixon." Masters admired the pioneers in the Spoon River cemetery. In "Aaron Hatfield," "Lucinda Matlock," "Rutherford McDowell," and other poems, he praised them and suggested or declared that the modern race had degenerated. The early pioneers appeared to him so freedom-loving, heroic, and courageous that those more recently dead often seemed weak in comparison.

In writing of pioneers Masters sometimes rose to high lyricism as in the "Anne Rutledge" epitaph, but his cadences are equally noble in such modern portraits as "Isaiah Beethoven." He approved of all courage, independence of spirit, generosity, nobility; he hated cruelty, greed, weak conformity to a pattern. He treated those whom he admired with a sort of spiritual fervor; those he disliked he struck with the full power of irony and satire. He admired those fighting against social, political, and economic injustice; in this group are "John Cabanis," "Magrady Graham," and "Herman Altman." Masters' ideas on American life as it should be originated partly in his belief in Jeffersonian democracy, already evidenced in his political essays. His indictment was not merely of the village but of all American civilization which failed to reach the Jeffersonian ideal.²¹ Because he wanted *Spoon River Anthology* to contain the macrocosm, and because he drew material

¹⁹ *Contemporary American Novelists, 1900-1920* (New York, 1922), p. 148. See pp. 146-153.

²⁰ Cf. Josephine Craven Chandler, "The Spoon River Country," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, XIV (October, 1921-January, 1922), 288.

²¹ See Herbert Ellsworth Childs, "Agrarianism and Sex: Edgar Lee Masters and the Modern Spirit," *The Sewanee Review*, XLI (July-September, 1933), 331-343, for a concise analysis of Masters' Jeffersonianism.

from his twenty years in Chicago as well as from his youth spent in Lewistown and Petersburg, it is unlikely that he meant to indict merely the village. He drew individual portraits of universal significance. In degree as the villagers failed to aspire to an almost idyllic, agrarian way of life, he castigated them. Thus he found much to denounce in village bankers, preachers, editors, businessmen. But he applied the same standard to America as a whole. Spoon River was simply the unit with which he happened to be dealing.

Masters' tendency toward the abstract and the philosophical is also evident. The "Epilogue" is perhaps the dullest and least artistic section of the *Anthology*, but it is an attempt at spiritual and symbolic interpretation. "Gustav Richter," "The Village Atheist," "Judson Stoddard," "Elijah Browning," and many others are god-seeking individuals. Toward the end of the volume, the epitaphs become increasingly philosophical and abstract. Opinions vary as to whether Masters dealt objectively with the philosophies of his characters or whether all the voices were really his own. Naturally he could not attain complete objectivity, could not withdraw from his own backgrounds and beliefs; yet individual epitaphs are surprisingly objective. "Judge Somers," "George Trimble," "Le Roy Goldman," "Justice Arnett," and others contain philosophies which Masters could not accept, but he allowed his characters to speak for themselves. His imaginative power is evident in his ability to enter into minds alien to his own. His god-seeking, his lack of religious orthodoxy, his political and moral liberalism, his attitudes toward many aspects of life are reflected not so much in individual portraits as in the book as a whole.

Masters has been accused of giving too much space to sex:

Everything that is coarse and revolting in the sexual life is here. "Spoon River" is one long chronicle of rapes, seductions, liaisons, and perversions. It is the great blot upon Mr. Masters' work. It is an obliquity of vision, a morbidness of mind, which distorts an otherwise remarkable picture.²²

Another critic insisted, "It is probably the outstanding trait of that collection that so many of the persons therein described represent pathetic failures to adjust themselves to a world whose official ideology prescribes strict monogamy."²³ Among the many epitaphs of this group are "Lucius Ather-ton," "Daisy Fraser," "Mrs. Benjamin Pantier," "Benjamin Pantier," "Willard Fluke," and "Georgine Sand Miner." "A count would probably show that fully one hundred of the inhabitants of Spoon River were direct or indirect victims of sex in one form or another: of sex starvation, or incompatibility,

²² Lowell, *Tendencies in Modern American Poetry*, p. 175.

²³ Childs, "Agrarianism and Sex," p. 339.

or crimes of violence, or disease, or any of a number of the distressing guises this problem assumes."²⁴

Undeniably Masters did dwell much on passion and love. His book came, too, at a time when honesty toward sex was not common in American poetry and fiction. His prose plays and his conventional verse had shown Masters to be interested in extramarital relations, in worldly-wise attitudes toward love, and in sexual problems. Thus his frankness in *Spoon River Anthology* hardly surprises. If many of the Spoon River stories had been told in conventional verse forms, they might have been received quietly. The large number of epitaphs with sex themes, the prosaic baldness of the free verse, the high degree of frankness, plus radicalism on other subjects such as religion, were too much for many readers to endure. Yet Masters' attitude was only a manifestation of a general contemporary movement, as very many books since 1915 bear witness. Into this modern attitude various elements entered—a new knowledge and consciousness of biology, a new attitude toward religion and churches, greater freedom of women and a change in the attitude toward the home, emphasis on self-expression rather than on denial, movements for birth control and studies in eugenics, and the effects of the first World War.²⁵ Today the book no longer shocks.

Masters wrote in a letter to Dreiser:

It's funny how children wanted [*sic*] to take awatch [*sic*] apart to look at the works, and how adult critics want to get at your origins—and then maybe mock them. That Carl Van Doren called my autobiography "Behind Spoon River"—he thought he had all secrets. By God I do hate these reviewers.²⁶

In spite of Masters' attitude toward such analysis, one may trace the origins of many Spoon River poems.²⁷ If one travels about twenty-five miles northwest of Springfield, Illinois, he reaches Petersburg, a hospitable, rural community very near Lincoln's New Salem. Continuing northwest, one arrives after another twenty-five-mile drive at Havana. Across the Illinois River and not more than fifteen miles farther northwest lies Lewistown. The Petersburg-Lewistown area with its small communities such as Atterberry, Oakford, Bernadotte, Ipava, and Chandlerville is the Spoon River country. Petersburg is in the Sangamon River valley; Lewistown is in the Spoon River valley.²⁸

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 339-340.

²⁵ Boynton, "The Voice of Chicago," pp. 56-57.

²⁶ August 19, 1939, Dreiser Collection, University of Pennsylvania Library, Philadelphia.

²⁷ Sources for this material include: Masters, *Across Spoon River: An Autobiography* (New York, 1936); Masters, "The Genesis of Spoon River"; Chandler, "The Spoon River Country."

²⁸ See Masters, *The Sangamon* (New York, 1942), and also my article, "Edgar Lee Masters—Biographer and Historian," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, LIV (Spring, 1961), 56-83.

Masters testified to the influence of his Petersburg years when he wrote, "the Sangamon river, not the Spoon river, furnished the purest springs for the Anthology, and colored the noblest portraits of the book."²⁹ Many of the Petersburg epitaphs are immediately identifiable. "Davis Matlock" and "Aaron Hatfield" both celebrate Squire Davis Masters, the poet's grandfather. Sevigne Houghton of "The Hill" was a neighbor of this grandfather. Concord Church, mentioned in "Aaron Hatfield," was a church in the Petersburg vicinity. "Johnnie Sayre" is the epitaph of a boyhood friend named Mitchell Miller, whom Masters later made the hero of a novel, *Mitch Miller*.³⁰ "Hamlet Micure" is a fictional name for Alex Masters, a brother of Edgar Lee Masters. Alex died at the age of five; his death is described in the epitaph. "Rebecca Wasson" and "John Wasson" are epitaphs of the grandparents of Lucinda Masters, celebrated in "Lucinda Matlock," one of the notable poems in the *Anthology*. As in the poem, Lucinda Masters met her husband by changing partners while driving home after a dance at Winchester; however, the episode occurred in the winter, rather than in June. As in the poem, she had twelve children, some of whom died young; she was married for seventy years and lived to be ninety-six. In spirit and in detail, "Lucinda Matlock" is a description of Masters' grandmother.

12 One group of poems centers around Lincoln's New Salem years. "Anne Rutledge" is, of course, an epitaph of the alleged sweetheart of Lincoln. "William H. Herndon" speaks for the law partner and friend of Lincoln. Herndon was for many years a citizen of Petersburg and was a law associate and close friend of Masters' father. "Hannah Armstrong" was the mother of Duff Armstrong, whom Lincoln defended in the almost legendary "almanac trial." The Armstrongs were friends of Lincoln in his New Salem days. The last poem in this group is "Fiddler Jones," an epitaph of an old-time country fiddler who was also Hannah Armstrong's brother. Other poems which allude to public figures are "Elliott Hawkins," "Archibald Higbie," "Adam Weirauch," "Carl Hamblin," and "Magrady Graham." The first two contain references to Lincoln; the other three, to the careers of Altgeld, Armour, Charles T. Yerkes, and the Chicago Haymarket anarchists.

The Lewistown area furnished Masters with more portraits than the Petersburg area and gave him the impetus to write the book: "It was this atmosphere of Northern light and cold winds that clarified my mind at last to the beauty of the Petersburg material, and pointed with steel the pen with which I drew the microcosm of the Spoon river country."³¹ He added,

²⁹ "The Genesis of Spoon River," p. 40.

³⁰ New York, 1920.

³¹ "The Genesis of Spoon River," p. 41.

"Petersburg was just a county fair of many people; Lewistown was an organized microcosm, and the best that I have ever known."³² If any one town is Spoon River, it is Lewistown. The river from which the title is taken flows through the area; towns mentioned in the *Anthology*, such as London Mills and Bernadotte, are in the neighborhood. Exciting Lewistown events like the burning of the Fulton County courthouse were incorporated into the book. "Nicholas Bindle" is the epitaph of the builder of Beadle's Opera House. "Thomas Rhodes" is another fictional name for a town citizen. "Washington McNeely" is generally considered to be Colonel L. W. Ross, one of the local aristocrats. Charley Metcalf of the livery stable became "Willie Metcalf." The story of a murder told in *Across Spoon River*³³ is used in "The Town Marshal" and "Jack McGuire." The marshal was named John Logan; the real name of "Jack McGuire" was Weldy. Major Walker, mentioned in "The Hill," was widely known in Lewistown. William Strode, a scientist and a friend of Masters, is "William Jones." Hardin W. Masters, the poet's father, was the model for "Kinsey Keene" and "E. C. Culbertson," while the poet himself is "Webster Ford." His teacher of Greek at Knox College supplied the name at least for the epitaph "Professor Newcomer."³⁴ The list could be extended, but only one other example demands attention. In the *Anthology* there is an epitaph of "Percy Bysshe Shelley," who was accidentally shot while hunting birds on Thompson's Lake. Over him was erected a marble shaft bearing the statue of a woman. In one of Lewistown's cemeteries, there is such a monument. This monument too marks the grave of a young man who was killed while duck hunting on Thompson's Lake.³⁵ He died on March 24, 1875, while Masters was still living in Petersburg. The name on his marble shaft is William Cullen Bryant. Perhaps there is no better example of Masters' use of home-town material.

13

Material gleaned from Masters' Chicago years is not as easy to identify. However, "Theodore the Poet" is a portrait of Theodore Dreiser, and "Paul McNeely," which was written for the definitive edition of the *Anthology*, honors Bertha Baum, who was Masters' nurse while he was ill with pneumonia early in 1915.

Masters' originality in name creation has been much praised. Actually the originality is not great. At least fifty-three poems have names from the Petersburg section, and at least sixty-six have names from the Lewistown

³² *Ibid.*, p. 45.

³³ Pp. 94-95.

³⁴ In October, 1913, Masters read in *The Dial* of Professor A. G. Newcomer's death. He wrote a conventional but sincere tribute, "In Memory of Professor Newcomer." This poem was published in *The Dial*, LV (October 16, 1913), 299, and has not appeared in any collection.

³⁵ Chandler, "The Spoon River Country," p. 329, supplies this information on W. C. Bryant.

section.³⁶ Sometimes he combined a Sangamon valley story with a Spoon valley name, or a Spoon valley story with a Sangamon valley name. In the case of "Editor Whedon," he used the real name of a mild Lewistown editor but applied it to a fanatical and treacherous editor of the same town. Other names, such as "Jonathan Swift Somers," are obviously synthetic. Not only did he adopt names from the Spoon River country, but he took them from Illinois historical documents and probably from such places as signs, windows, and even telephone directories. In writing to Dreiser, he once said, "you could have got names closer to the spirit of the play, I mean more suggestive of the environment. Do you keep a book to jot down names in? Signs and windows are fruitful."³⁷

The Petersburg-Lewistown area supplied much of the material for *Spoon River Anthology*, but earlier Masters had considered using the material in a novel. In 1906, just before leaving on a European trip, he went to Petersburg for a short visit. While there

I told my father that I was going to write a novel someday, which would be my only book. I said that the law was more and more engrossing my strength, and that I should do well to write one book. He wanted to know what it would be about. I told him that my life in Chicago had shown me that the country lawyer and the city lawyer were essentially the same; that the country banker and the city banker had the same nature; and so on down through the list of tradespeople, preachers, sensualists, and all kinds of human beings. That was the germ of *Spoon River Anthology* written eight years after this time.³⁸

Meanwhile, Masters had become a close friend of William Marion Reedy, editor of the St. Louis *Mirror*, "a weekly journal of editorial comment upon politics, notables, poetry, together with book criticisms and articles on the single-tax, politics, new schools of literature, and a vast variety of topics."³⁹ When Masters began to read the *Mirror*, about 1904, he began also to correspond with its editor. About 1907 he needed advice concerning St. Louis lawyers and went directly to Reedy. This first visit led to a steady and intimate correspondence and many later visits. Masters admired Reedy's wit, scholarship, fine judgment, and zest for living. He wrote that his friendship with Reedy "was the outstanding friendship of my life, as it was of his. No man was so close to him as I was; nor any so close to me as he was."⁴⁰

In Reedy's *Mirror* Masters was able to read Turgenev and some of the French symbolists. He had read also at various times Ossian, Henley, and Whitman. He was familiar with the Greek choruses, the choruses of

³⁶ Masters, "The Genesis of Spoon River," p. 40.

³⁷ March (-April) [1914], Dreiser Collection.

³⁸ *Across Spoon River*, p. 286.

³⁹ Masters, "William Marion Reedy," *American Speech*, IX (April, 1934), 96.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

Samson Agonistes, the "Dreary Day" scene in *Faust*, and the cadenced prose of *Hamlet* and of the Old Testament. Thus he was familiar with free verse, and he knew also that imagism was not a new discovery. He did not, however, favor experiment for its own sake, and when Reedy attempted to persuade him to make *Spoon River Anthology* more imagistic, Masters refused.

About 1909 Masters read the *Greek Anthology*. In "The Genesis of Spoon River," he wrote that he could not remember whether Reedy gave the book to him, but he did remember references to it in the *Mirror*.⁴¹ In an article called "Spoon River and Greece," Nathan Haskell Dole quoted a number of poems by such Greek writers as Meleager and Carphylides and attempted to show that in spirit and even in content some of these poems were similar to Masters' Spoon River poems.⁴² Certainly Masters was much impressed by the *Greek Anthology* and was thinking about it shortly before the publication of the first Spoon River poems, for on April 20, 1914, he wrote to Dreiser: "Drop in some book store and buy Bohn's edition of the Greek anthology—good book for spring days. . . . Moreover you will their [*sic*] see the original of which the enclosed is my imitation."⁴³

Masters' knowledge of free verse increased when *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* began publication in 1912. In it he was able to read the verse experiments of Carl Sandburg and others. In the winter of 1913-14 he became lawyer for a waitresses' union which was on strike. The waitresses had been denied the right to picket and were accused of conspiracy to injure the business of their employers. The case lasted many months, and it was in the courtroom during a recess that Masters met Sandburg. Sandburg had read and admired a poem by Masters in the *Mirror* and now came for newspaper information on the waitresses' case. He was a reporter for a small daily paper and began to visit Masters often to obtain news of the case. Sandburg showed Masters his experiments in verse, but Masters did not find them especially novel. He did find them refreshing, and they must have increased his awareness of free verse. Harriet Monroe reported an "editor's night" held by the Book and Play Club of Chicago in February, 1915. Masters was present and testified how *Spoon River Anthology* was conceived "when his mind, already shaken out of certain literary prejudices by the reading in *Poetry* of much free verse, especially that of Carl Sandburg, was spurred to more active radicalism through a friendship with that iconoclastic champion of free speech, free form, free art—freedom of the soul."⁴⁴ Masters himself credited in print neither *Poetry* nor Sandburg with this

⁴¹ "The Genesis of Spoon River," p. 48.

⁴² *Boston Evening Transcript*, June 30, 1915, p. 22.

⁴³ Dreiser Collection.

⁴⁴ Harriet Monroe, *A Poet's Life* (New York, 1938), p. 370.

much influence. He bought *Poetry* but wrote in *Across Spoon River*, "I had no interest in it, and looked upon it with indifference as one of the habitual manifestations of Chicago's amateur spirit."⁴⁵ He probably read Sandburg's "Chicago" in *Poetry* but later considered it a "mere piece of interesting extravagance,"⁴⁶ untrue of the city as a whole. He has not recorded any debt to Sandburg, whom he came to regard as "one of the slickest Swedes in this country."⁴⁷

Before 1914 Masters had already contributed poems of conventional measure and rhyme to the *Mirror*, but Reedy had urged him to write something clearly American. Reedy did not suggest the use of Lewistown-Petersburg material or the use of the epitaph form. "He merely acted like a friend who thought I could do something more distinctive than I was doing, somehow, some way, but without telling me how to do it."⁴⁸

About May 20, 1914, Masters' mother came from Lewistown to Chicago to visit him. "She was the most fascinating of minds when she was in her best mood. She was wonderfully humorous, she was acute of perception, her mind flashed with divinations, she looked through doors and walls with those clairvoyant eyes, all this beyond nearly anyone that I have known."⁴⁹ He and his mother talked about neighbors they had known in Lewistown and Petersburg, about events and individuals that were prominent in the history of the section, about their own family history. On the morning when she left Chicago, they had a final talk before he put her on the train. Then he walked home and at once wrote "The Hill" and several epitaphs. In *Across Spoon River* he said that he had almost at once the idea of portraying the macrocosm by the microcosm and of putting interrelated portraits side by side. Not only did he owe the final impetus to his mother, but he declared other debts to both parents. Concerning his father, Hardin Masters, he said:

he could have written "Spoon River" better than I did it. It remains true that many of the stories in that book I lived through with him, and that the humor, the characterization, the lusty vitality of the portraits came from my inheritance of his spiritual constitution; while the philosophy, the mysticism, the imagery, the juxtaposition of ironic circumstance came through my mother. Their democracy is

⁴⁵ *Across Spoon River*, p. 337. In letters to Harriet Monroe, Masters wrote otherwise. On February 2, 1915, he praised the current issue of *Poetry* and said, "Do you know that everyone is talking poetry these days? . . . You see what you've done . . . Hold on to the magazine—hold on to it financially and every way. It has done more for Chicago already than anything we've had. . . ." On October 19, 1927, he wrote to congratulate Miss Monroe on *Poetry's* fifteenth birthday and credited her with giving "poets of the last decade a chance" and so stirring "the lethargic taste and interest [*sic*] of the country." Both letters are in the Monroe Collection, University of Chicago Library.

⁴⁶ *Across Spoon River*, p. 337.

⁴⁷ Masters to Dreiser, April 30, 1940, Dreiser Collection.

⁴⁸ "The Genesis of *Spoon River*," p. 48.

⁴⁹ *Across Spoon River*, p. 338.

from him; their doubt of democracy from her; their music from her, their expressiveness from both, and their passion and vitality.⁵⁰

According to Harriet Monroe and Eunice Tietjens, both friends of Masters, the first publication of the epitaphs was something of an accident; in fact, their accounts of the inception of the *Anthology* poems do not correspond exactly with Masters' account. Miss Monroe said that Reedy refused to print more of Masters' conventional verse and asked him for something more modern in subject and method. Masters then began the *Anthology* "as a kind of challenge to the free-versifiers whose voices in *Poetry* were beginning to excite the critics. Intending perhaps a parody, he was soon caught up by his subject to produce, in a form fitted to his genius, the masterpiece which led publishers to his door."⁵¹ Mrs. Tietjens told essentially the same story: Reedy would not publish more of the undistinguished conventional verse and challenged Masters to put real life into his poems. Masters was then aroused to begin *Spoon River Anthology*, "not thinking of the sketches as poetry, thinking of them as a means of refuting Reedy. But this astute editor recognized them for what they were and published them at once."⁵² Mrs. Tietjens said that Masters himself gave her this account. When Masters reviewed the book in which she made this statement,⁵³ he did not refute her assertion that the sketches were begun almost as a joke—as a way of proving Reedy wrong. We know too that when he sent the first Spoon River poems to Reedy and received in return a letter "saying that this was the stuff" and praising them extravagantly, he was astonished. He laughed at the ridiculous title and wanted to change it to *Pleasant Plains Anthology*, but Reedy, of course, dissented.⁵⁴ In 1915, while he was preparing the definitive edition, Masters' opinion of the book was apparently not high: "S. R. is not what I expected to do. It seems to me by the way, not in the line. My attitude towards it is therefore detached and impersonal. And I feel if I can get my steady hand back I can beat it in another direction."⁵⁵

The first *Anthology* poems to appear in Reedy's *Mirror* were "Hod Putt," "Ollie McGee," "The Unknown," "Cassius" ("Cassius Hueffer"), "Serepta the Scold" ("Serepta Mason"), "Amanda" ("Amanda Barker"), "Chase Henry," and "The Hill."⁵⁶ Epitaphs appeared in the May 29, 1914, issue and weekly thereafter until January 15, 1915. They were printed under the

⁵⁰ David Karsner, "Edgar Lee Masters," *Sixteen Authors to One* (New York, 1928), pp. 130-131. Karsner quotes Masters. See also *Across Spoon River*, p. 339.

⁵¹ *A Poet's Life*, p. 378.

⁵² *The World at My Shoulder*, p. 44.

⁵³ "Every Word Is Intentional," *Poetry*, LII (September, 1938), 356-359.

⁵⁴ "The Genesis of Spoon River," pp. 48-49.

⁵⁵ Masters in a letter to Dreiser, July 3, 1915, Dreiser Collection.

⁵⁶ Fox, "William Marion Reedy and the St. Louis *Mirror*," p. 66. Miss Fox includes a list of the epitaphs with the dates and the order in which they appeared in the *Mirror*. See pp. 68-70.

pseudonym Webster Ford, which Masters had already used for the publication of *Songs & Sonnets* and *Songs and Sonnets, Second Series*.⁵⁷ He used a pseudonym because he feared the effect of publicity upon his law career. Only his family, Jake Prassel (his secretary), Sandburg, and, of course, Reedy knew at first the real identity of the writer. The editors of *Poetry* were later told the secret.

Masters wrote the epitaphs in odd moments in such varied places as his home, his office, restaurants, trains. He jotted them down on whatever paper he had at hand, and Jake Prassel later typed them for him.⁵⁸ Sandburg visited him often to observe the progress of the work. When the summer of 1914 arrived, Masters continued to work on the waitresses' case but was able to spend some time at Spring Lake, Michigan, where he rented part of a house for his family. In July he wrote to Dreiser that Reedy had gone to Europe but that he himself was too busy to make such a trip: "And so I tread—writing betimes the Spoon River stuff into which I am pouring divers philosophies—taking the emptied tomato cans of the rural dead to fill with the waters of the macrocosm."⁵⁹ A month later he wrote that *Spoon River* was still progressing and that he had Dreiser "pickled" as "Theodore the Poet."⁶⁰ In September he wrote that he had returned from his vacation at "The Oaks," Spring Lake, Michigan, where he had walked, swum, rested, read, and written many epitaphs.⁶¹

He returned to much hard work on the waitresses' case. But life was not all labor. Spoon River's fame was growing, although the identity of the

⁵⁷ These books and *The Blood of The Prophets* were the only ones which Masters published under pseudonyms. Dexter Wallace, the pseudonym used for the latter book, was compounded from two family names. Webster Ford was probably compounded from the names of two Elizabethan playwrights. Masters delighted in the use of pseudonyms. After 1915 he wrote letters and poems to periodicals under the name Elmer Chubb. These were in the later religious style of William Jennings Bryan and were intended to be sly exposures of stuffiness and narrow-mindedness. Chubb later became a character in Masters' *Lickee Nuts* (New York, 1930). Elmer Chubb, L.L.D., D.D. (and sometimes Ph.D.), was perhaps Masters' favorite imaginary person, but he was not the only one. Not only did Masters write letters to Dreiser and Harriet Monroe and sign them "Elmer Chubb," but he pretended at times to be Hod Putt, Lucius Atherton, Lute Puckett, Harley Prowler, and Sir Bors. Hod Putt and Lucius Atherton are names taken from *Spoon River Anthology*, and Lute Puckett may be a brother of the *Anthology's* Lydia Puckett. The letters and miscellaneous items to which Masters signed these names are sometimes pornographic. Harley Prowler is an imaginary private investigator, adept at reporting on the chastity of women. In 1938 Masters wrote several letters to "Sir Theodore" and signed them "Sir Bors." These rather playful letters imitate a Middle English style. In addition to writing letters using pseudonyms, Masters had handbills printed advertising such lectures as that of Elmer Chubb, "During the Trial of the Infidel Scopes." These materials are in the Harriet Monroe Collection at the University of Chicago and in the Dreiser Collection at the University of Pennsylvania.

⁵⁸ Masters said he was once offered \$5000 for the manuscript, but it had been thrown away: "a man doesn't keep menu cards." Quoted by Robert van Gelder, "An Interview With Mr. Edgar Lee Masters," *The New York Times Book Review*, February 15, 1942, p. 28.

⁵⁹ July 11, 1914, Dreiser Collection. See also "Spoon River Poet Called Great," *New York Times*, April 4, 1915, p. 7.

⁶⁰ In a letter to Dreiser, August 20, 1914, Dreiser Collection.

⁶¹ In a letter to Dreiser, September 7, 1914, Dreiser Collection.

author was not generally known. It was known, however, in the *Poetry* office, and he spent happy hours with Harriet Monroe, Helen Hoyt, Eunice Tietjens, Alice Corbin Henderson, and visitors to the office. The editors regretted that *Spoon River Anthology* was not being published in Chicago, and especially in *Poetry*, but the *Mirror* was actually a better organ for Masters' purpose. Not only could the *Mirror* publish weekly installments of the poems, but the importance of Reedy's paper and his rank as one of America's most influential editors boded well for the success of the poems. Editors in all parts of the country read the *Mirror* and were likely to notice and comment on *Spoon River Anthology*. In a letter to Harriet Monroe, dated November 21, 1914, Masters said that he would give her some *Anthology* poems later but that he was "under a sort of contract to finish up with the *Mirror*. My goal has been 200, and it may run a little over. I have printed 190; the excess will be free contributions or contributions freed from my present arrangement."⁶² He added that he had written for her a poem called "Silence." This was actually his first poem printed in *Poetry*; it appeared in February, 1915.

Mrs. Masters wished to see the poems in book form and without the pseudonym. Reedy and other friends were urging Masters to reveal himself. Finally on November 20, 1914, Reedy published an article in the *Mirror* in which he gave the identity of Webster Ford. Masters said later that he had his most profitable law case after his authorship of the *Spoon River* poems became known but his business as a whole was utterly ruined.⁶³

Overwork at the law and at poetry, anxiety over finances, nervousness over his newly-won fame, and reaction from a long period of creativeness now brought him to physical exhaustion. On December 25, the *Mirror* printed "Joseph Dixon," "Harlan Sewall," and "Alfred Moir," poems showing a growing tendency toward abstraction. On January 1, it printed more poems in this vein—"Russell Kincaid," "Aaron Hatfield," and "Isaiah Beethoven." Finally on January 15, 1915, Masters ended the series with "Webster Ford," his own epitaph. Within a few days he was ill with pneumonia.

As early as June 11, 1914, Masters wrote to Dreiser about the publication of *Spoon River Anthology* in book form. He had not yet sought a publisher nor had thought of doing so: "I am not proud or touchy and do not scorn suggestions or offers of help. Let the poison work a little while and may be somebody will make me an offer."⁶⁴ By the time he became ill, the Macmillan Company had solicited the manuscript and was preparing the

⁶² Monroe Collection.

⁶³ Van Gelder, "An Interview With Mr. Edgar Lee Masters," p. 28, quotes Masters.

⁶⁴ Dreiser Collection.

book for publication. Because of his illness, Harriet Monroe corrected the proofs and added the explanatory note to "The Spooniad." Masters had already rearranged the epitaphs, which had appeared in the *Mirror* in no particular order. Macmillan published the book in April, 1915.

Meanwhile, critical comment had already begun. In September, 1914, *Current Opinion* reprinted from Reedy's *Mirror* "Blind Jack," "The Circuit Judge," and "Griffy the Cooper" by Webster Ford. The editor of the poetry page called the *Anthology* poems "One of the most interesting experiments in verse, or semi-verse, that we have seen in some time."⁶⁵ This was perhaps the earliest notice given the poems outside the pages of the *Mirror*. In March, 1915, *Current Opinion* continued its campaign on behalf of Masters' epitaphs by reporting the excitement which the poems were arousing: "Vachel Lindsay, in a speech at the Poetry Society dinner in New York several weeks ago, spoke of it with enthusiasm, and Ezra Pound, writing in *The Egoist*, begins a long review of it—characteristically jaundiced as to America in general—with the ejaculatory sentence: 'At last! At last America has discovered a poet!'"⁶⁶ The editor could not call the epitaphs great or fine poetry, but "they are real literature, very original in conception, and come nearer to being poetry than anything else."⁶⁷

Alice Corbin Henderson, an editor of *Poetry*, discovered the epitaphs in August, 1914, and liked them immediately. She gave them a brief notice in the October, 1914, issue of *Poetry* and compensated for this brevity by a long review in the June, 1915, number. Mrs. Tietjens had, meanwhile, contributed an appreciation to the *Literary Review* for December 18, 1914.

Notices began to accumulate swiftly. The Poetry Society of America discussed free verse at its February, 1915, meeting, and some of the members questioned whether the form should be considered poetry. There was agreement that free verse had proved itself as literature in such books as *Spoon River Anthology*, even though it was an uncertain form.⁶⁸ Edward J. Wheeler of *Current Opinion* wrote to Masters about this discussion, and Masters commented to Dreiser:

But why does anyone suspect that it is? [that *Spoon River Anthology* is poetry] Who the 'ell said it was? Hence I began to look up definitions of poetry . . . and the *Anthology* fills the bill so far as the absence of rhyme and metre and rythm [*sic*] are concerned . . . Wouldn't it make you sick, Mabel, to hear the burden of the grasshopper gnawing the leaves and singing? I don't know whether its [*sic*] poetry or not, or anything else; the voice of the country, if it speaks, must settle

⁶⁵ "Voices of the Living Poets," *Current Opinion*, LVII (September, 1914), 204.

⁶⁶ "Voices of the Living Poets," *Current Opinion*, LVIII (March, 1915), 201.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ This meeting was reported in "Voices of the Living Poets," *Current Opinion*, LVIII (April, 1915), 273.

that. One's own opinion counts for little in the composition of the verdict. I've known fellows who thought well of their stuff to be voted down by the sweet voices of their countrymen.⁶⁹

In a well-publicized lecture, John Cowper Powys recognized Masters as a great American poet. Masters read a *New York Times* clipping "with amusement and awe. I am E. Masters in New York; in high circles here 'Ed' Masters; among the ladies 'Eddie' Masters; in politer circles Edgar Lee Masters; in Spoon River Lee Masters. Powys didn't know my name!"⁷⁰

Some magazines were eager to reprint *Spoon River* poems. *Collier's Weekly* wanted to print prose tales. One of *Collier's* literary agents was Hamlin Garland, who tried to engage Masters to use Spoon River material for weekly prose portraits. Masters' reaction was: "These periodicals are always watching for new men, for new sensations. Here I had created a new form, and this agent, a literary man himself, and his periodical naturally were willing to have me reduce my style to the popular demands of a million circulation weekly. If I had done this my material would thus have been used up, and I should have had nothing but a little money."⁷¹

Powys and Garland were not the only literary men to acknowledge the *Anthology*. Ezra Pound returned from England "full of strange oaths and firecrackers for adjectives," and wrote to Masters in praise of the book. He had written an article on the *Anthology*, but a London magazine had refused to print it because it concerned free verse. Pound sent the article to Masters "with many kinds of blasphemy on editors," but Masters found the review "sparin' and aloof."⁷² However, Pound published "Affirmations," an article on Masters, in Reedy's *Mirror* for May 21, 1915. Floyd Dell found much to respect and much to dislike in the book. In his opinion, Masters' philosophy limited the *Anthology* seriously. Dell believed that a poet with more appreciation of America's humor, faith, and courage, and more belief in the goodness of the world would have written a truer book.⁷³

William Stanley Braithwaite set a pattern for criticism when he found the *Anthology* "the most fascinating novel I have read for a long time" and "the first successful novel in verse we have had in American literature."⁷⁴

⁶⁹ April 2, 1915, Dreiser Collection. Cf. his short article, "What Is Poetry?" *Poetry*, VI (September, 1915), 306-308.

⁷⁰ In a letter to Dreiser, April 2, 1915, Dreiser Collection. One account of the lecture is "Spoon River Poet Called Great," *The New York Times*, April 4, 1915, pp. 7, 9.

⁷¹ *Across Spoon River*, p. 363. The identity of the literary agent is revealed in Masters' letter to Dreiser of March 5, 1940, Dreiser Collection.

⁷² Masters in a letter to Dreiser, April 8, 1915, Dreiser Collection.

⁷³ "Spoon River People," *The New Republic*, II (April 17, 1915), sup. 14-15. Masters commented in a letter to Dreiser, April 30, 1915, that he liked this review "as far as it went," but he was waiting for someone "to get the idea of the 'Spooniad,' and also if you please the idea that I haven't preached a philosophy but have etched life as I saw it." The letter is in the Dreiser Collection.

⁷⁴ "The Soul of Spoon River," *Boston Evening Transcript*, May 1, 1915, part 3, p. 8.

He saw it as an extremely vivid portrait of a community, as a microcosm, as "the first *Comedie Humaine* in verse," as a unique and inimitable masterpiece. Yet he was not sure of its adequacy as poetry. Neither was the reviewer for *The Nation*:

The form is the faintest sublimation of prose. Here and there is a happy phrase, an inversion, a thoughtful simile, a momentary attention to rhythm or assonance; but for the most part the language is curt, undistinguished, and unmelodious, and the author's use of broken lines seems an affectation.⁷⁵

While the reviewer for the *New York Times* found the epitaphs provocative and in many respects admirable,⁷⁶ Raymond Alden of *The Dial* called them "the *reductio ad absurdum* of certain of the new methods—such as the abandonment of conventional form and the fearless scrutiny of disagreeable realities."⁷⁷ He recognized its virility but deplored the number of violent deaths and suicides. His final judgment was: "A really remarkable series of character-studies, though the half would be much better than the whole; but for poetry—*cui bono?* Mr. Masters has shown before this that he knows what verse is; how then can he perpetrate, and endure to see in type, trash like this."⁷⁸

Two of the most influential reviews were by Lawrence Gilman and Willard H. Wright. Gilman found the epitaphs alive and provocative; he commented on the authenticity of names, the poignancy of overtones, the completeness, the use of contemporary material. Perhaps his most striking comment was his comparison of *Spoon River Anthology* to motion pictures; he called it "a series of vivid, concentrated, rapidly shifting visualizations, related and interwoven, and employing that favorite device of the screenplay: a single event exhibited from different dramatic angles."⁷⁹ In spite of some doubt about the verse form, Gilman's review was very favorable. Willard Wright's article was fierce denunciation. In his opinion, "The only true basis of artistic judgment is aesthetic form,"⁸⁰ and he found the *Anthology* completely negligible in that respect. He found it had little or no value in regard to realism, lyricism, documentation, philosophy, psychology, and poetic diction. He admitted its worth as illustration but called illustra-

⁷⁵ Review of *Spoon River Anthology*, *The Nation*, C (May 27, 1915), 604. Cf. Louis Untermeyer, *The New Era in American Poetry* (New York, 1919), p. 169: "The mere shaping of such lines was a continual restraining process, forcing the author to make a few pungent sentences out of what would have grown prolix in prose. And the divisions of these lines was similarly of benefit to the reader. They arrested the eye; they marked out, with dramatic effect, the sudden turn for the mind; they supplied a certain music to an often unmusical setting."

⁷⁶ "A Human Anthology of Spoon River," *The New York Times Book Review*, July 18, 1915, p. 261.

⁷⁷ Review of *Spoon River Anthology*, *The Dial*, LIX (June 24, 1915), 28.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ "Moving-Picture Poetry," *The North American Review*, CCLII (August, 1915), 274.

⁸⁰ "Mr. Masters' 'Spoon River Anthology': A Criticism," *The Forum*, LV (January, 1916),

tion "the most insignificant of all literary considerations."⁸¹ Perhaps it had atmosphere, but he considered atmosphere "the meagrest of all artistic appeals."⁸² Neither would he credit Masters with originality but asserted that Robinson's *Children of the Night* was "the undeniable source of this new author's ideas and inspiration—not only in his broad scheme, but down to the smallest general details."⁸³ Masters wrote directly from Robinson, while Robinson had followed Crabbe. Wright's final estimate was: "The Anglo-Saxon is a lover of superficial speciousness, of quasi-materialism, of cheap novelty. He also takes a secret delight in boldness of expression and morbid sexual details—the hypocritical Freudian reaction to a zymotic puritanism. These things are all summed up and emphasized in the *Spoon River Anthology*."⁸⁴

On December 22, 1915, Masters wrote:

Still I think it is a low order of criticism to be forever tracing out a man's artistic derivations. I think I wrote you in my other letter but if I did not, I wish to here and now affirm: that I never read a line of Crabbe in my life until a month ago, and I never heard of Robinson until the Anthology was finished, and never read his books until this fall. I only possess one now . . . there is no resemblance in my judgment between my work and his or even Crabbe's.⁸⁵

In "The Genesis of Spoon River," he said that there was a copy of Crabbe's poems in the Masters' home in Lewistown but that he never "looked into the old book at home." He bought and read the poems only after reviewers had compared his poems to those of Crabbe.⁸⁶ When Mrs. William Vaughn Moody suggested to him that both he and Robinson were akin to Crabbe, Masters not only denied familiarity with Crabbe's poems but said that he could not remember having read Robinson's poems. Robinson was represented in E. C. Stedman's *An American Anthology* (1900). Although Masters was familiar with this book, he did not remember Robinson's contributions.⁸⁷

In addition to formal reviews of *Spoon River Anthology*, there were such novel ones as Bliss Carman's criticisms in free verse, modeled on the verse form of the epitaphs. While Braithwaite saw in each poem a chapter of a novel, Carman saw in each one the plot for a short story.⁸⁸ Not only did the *Anthology* receive notice in standard reviews, but readers wrote to editors.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 112.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

⁸⁵ In a letter to Dreiser, December 22, 1915, Dreiser Collection.

⁸⁶ "The Genesis of Spoon River," p. 43. Cf. *Across Spoon River*, pp. 60-61.

⁸⁷ *Across Spoon River*, p. 372.

⁸⁸ "Bliss Carman Reads the 'Spoon River Anthology,'" *Current Opinion*, LX (February, 1916), 127.

For example, in March, 1916, Orvis B. Irwin wrote to *The Dial* that "The first reading was the horrible experience of a nightmare." *Spoon River* was "too earthy" and unwholesome to be great poetry. He compared it to a reptile creeping through slime and denounced it as "a description of life as naked and analytic as we might find between the covers of a work on sexual psychology."⁸⁹ R. S. Loomis answered Irwin in an April issue of *The Dial* and defended Masters' view of life.⁹⁰ Irwin wrote again in May, this time admitting that *Spoon River* was "an excellent laboratory manual" but denying that science made good poetry.⁹¹ After Loomis replied a second time, *The Dial's* editor was at last compelled to deny further space to the discussion.⁹²

Meanwhile, the fame of the book had reached England. The London *New Statesman*, for example, denied that the epitaphs were much more than clever journalism.⁹³ C. E. Lawrence of the London *Bookman* wrote a highly favorable review,⁹⁴ and the London *Nation* called the *Anthology* "one of the greatest books of the present century."⁹⁵ In England, as in America, the reception was varied, but *Spoon River Anthology* had perhaps the greatest literary impact on England of any book since *Leaves of Grass*.⁹⁶

The fame of the *Anthology* was not limited to English-speaking countries. In addition to publication in England and America, it was fully translated into German, Swedish, Finnish, Norwegian, and Danish, and was partially translated into Japanese, French, Italian, and other languages. *La Collina*, an opera made from the book by Mario Peragallo, was performed in Vienna and Venice.⁹⁷

There were, in addition, several attempts to make it into a motion picture. As early as November 30, 1915, Masters was interested in selling scenarios to Hollywood, for he wrote to Dreiser that he had several plays which might be good material.⁹⁸ If one can judge from the Dreiser Collection letters,

⁸⁹ "One Reader's Reactions to 'Spoon River,'" *The Dial*, LX (March 30, 1916), 325.

⁹⁰ "In Praise of 'Spoon River,'" *The Dial*, LX (April 27, 1916), 415-416.

⁹¹ "More about 'Spoon River,'" *The Dial*, LX (May 25, 1916), 498-499.

⁹² "'Spoon River' Once More," *The Dial*, LXI (June 22, 1916), 14-15.

⁹³ "The Transatlantic Lyre," *The New Statesman* (London), VI (January 8, 1916), 332.

⁹⁴ "Somewhere Near Helicon," *The Bookman* (London), XLIX (March, 1916), 187-188.

⁹⁵ The London *Nation* review is quoted at length in "Another Walt Whitman," *The Literary Digest*, LII (March 4, 1916), 564-565. This quotation is from p. 565.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 564.

⁹⁷ Ellen Coyne Masters supplied most of this information. A letter from Masters to Dreiser, April 21, 1921, Dreiser Collection, mentions that Masters had sold *Spoon River* to Italian publishers and that there was interest in Paris in translating it into French. Another letter to Dreiser, April 19, 1939, Dreiser Collection, says that Masters received no money from the English edition, that he once received \$500 from Germany, and that the Swedish translation was stolen and published in Finland, where the copyright laws were not effective. Mrs. Masters said also (letter of August 15, 1949) that Percy Grainger "wrote a piano selection and a symphony called *Spoon River* from an authentic old fiddle tune called *Spoon River*. Schirmer publishes it."

⁹⁸ Dreiser Collection.

his eagerness to sell *Spoon River Anthology* for Hollywood production did not become pronounced until the end of 1938. He wrote to Dreiser shortly after Christmas and said that he considered many Hollywood pictures undistinctive in language and trivial in plot, but he continued:

I may write to Hughes about filming *Spoon River*. If I only had a good man in technique and in imagination to fetch from that book the most dramatic [sic] and pictorial story I believe [sic] it would go. A really magnificent [sic] picture could be [sic] made from that book by the right tackle. I have tried it myself, but I am not skilled in that kind of writing. Years ago the writers of Paramount [sic] tried to get it and failed. It is hard to do; but I believe it would catch them off [sic] as well as the elect if it were rightly done.⁹⁹

Less than a week later he said he would be glad to have Dreiser talk to Wanger about *Spoon River Anthology*.¹⁰⁰ He had tried unsuccessfully for a long time to sell it in book form; now he considered getting a collaborator to help him write a marketable scenario. When he wrote this letter, January 1, 1939, he was desperately in need of money: "I am hanging by tired fingers to the edge of [sic] the cliff taking in the bottomless gulf below, and every [sic] morning I wonder how much longer I can hang on." He could not finance a trip to California, where he might sell story rights, and he began to wonder how to get money to live in New York City (where he had moved soon after the success of *Spoon River Anthology*).

Another letter shows Masters' ideas for adaptation of the book:

The Epilogue to that book [*Spoon River Anthology*] has a short drama in which Beelzebub mounts a stage, makes a talk and then summons the dead from their graves. That's one way at least to get them on the stage. As a part of this imaginative device I thought of something else: there was a doctor in this [sic] hotel who had a lot of slides which he threw upon a screen. They were of cells, sperm and ova: the sperm boring through [sic] the outer shell of the ova. For the rest it could be shown what happens when this boring takes place, which is a boiling and a frothing, as the being comes into existence.

He also showed dead cells. They looked like pimples on the moon, like the octagonal stones in the dead streets of Pompeii. I never was more shocked to see how dead these cells were.

Maybe this could be taken as a kind of symbolic prologue, preceding the appearance of Beelzebub. I have in mind pictures that would thrill. The mere stories could be worked out from the poems. Even one interrelated series could be selected for that. At the last, at the fade out, the dead cells could be shown.

All in all the film could be made highly imaginative, and by that fact thrilling to the mob and to the wise.¹⁰¹

By August 19, 1939, Masters had almost given up hope of selling the

⁹⁹ December 27, 1938, Dreiser Collection.

¹⁰⁰ In a letter to Dreiser, January 1, 1939, Dreiser Collection. Wanger was probably Walter Wanger, the Hollywood producer.

¹⁰¹ Masters to Dreiser, January 10, 1939, Dreiser Collection.

book to Hollywood. He thought that perhaps Dreiser's method of being on the scene in Hollywood was the right one, and perhaps Dreiser's books were more easily adaptable for screen use. He saw no hope of going to Hollywood himself, for "What little I make I pick up by being here [New York]."¹⁰² In June, 1943, he was still trying unsuccessfully to sell the *Anthology* to Hollywood and hoping that Dreiser would be able to help him.¹⁰³

In 1918 Masters again used the Spoon River material when he wrote a free verse poem called "Spoon River Revisited."¹⁰⁴ The poem records that the author has visited Spoon River and been frightened by what he has seen. Gambling, drinking, labor strikes, books by liberals and radicals, boxing, free speech, free assembly, and many other things have been outlawed, chiefly through the influence of Editor Whedon.¹⁰⁵ The Spoon River folk are saying that Spoon River's morality will leaven all America. Masters submitted this poem to *Poetry* but withdrew it because he decided it was an affront to the heroic efforts which Americans were making during the war.¹⁰⁶ Nevertheless, he allowed it to be printed in *The New Republic* for November, 1918.

The July, 1923, issue of *Vanity Fair* contained the first part of Masters' sequel to *Spoon River Anthology*. Approximately twenty epitaphs were printed in this magazine each month from July, 1923, through February, 1924. In August, 1924, Boni and Liveright published *The New Spoon River* in book form.

In the decade from 1914 to 1924, Spoon River had changed as obviously as had many other American towns. Before the first World War, it had a basically agrarian culture; in 1924 it had become "a ganglion/For the monster brain Chicago."¹⁰⁷ Its industrial and mechanical civilization was evident in its advertisements, in the relations between employer and employed, in the stepped-up pace of the citizens, even in the management of the cemetery. Marx, the sign painter, painted advertisements of chewing gum, cheap funeral parlors, life insurance, and the automat. McDowell Young noted that the names in the village had changed from those like Churchill, Rutledge, and Spears to those like Berkowitz, Geisler, and Lukasewski. As the canning works had been absorbed by the trust, so were

¹⁰² In a letter to Dreiser, August 19, 1939, Dreiser Collection.

¹⁰³ In a letter to Dreiser, June 30, 1943, Dreiser Collection. See also letters to Dreiser dated February 3, 1939, and June 19, 1942. The latter contains evidence of Masters' personal enjoyment of motion pictures.

¹⁰⁴ *The New Republic*, XVII (November 23, 1918), 105. This is an uncollected poem.

¹⁰⁵ *Supra*, pp. 7, 15.

¹⁰⁶ Masters in a letter to Harriet Monroe, May 29, 1918, Monroe Collection.

¹⁰⁷ *The New Spoon River* (New York, 1924), p. 26.

the Americans of English ancestry being absorbed by "the weeds of races."¹⁰⁸ Young noted the passing of the old republic. The new era reached the law courts, which were now less human, more ruthless, more under the control of city interests, as "Henry Breckenridge" attested. Even family life changed. The grandmother of Mrs. Gard Waful had ten children and did all her own work; Mrs. Waful's mother had three children and servants; Mrs. Waful herself had only one child but knew how to organize clubs and entertain celebrities. Mechanization reached the cemetery: an office was built by the gate and fitted with books, safes, steel cabinets, typewriters, and stenographers. Yet except for industrial changes, Spoon River was much the same. As Bruno Bean, the mechanic, said, the advent of cars made "no change in the game of men."¹⁰⁹

The organization of the two books is almost identical. Both begin with a table of contents arranged alphabetically. The opening poem of each is a free verse lyric. In *The New Spoon River* the lyric is called "The Valley of Stillness"; it is similar but inferior to "The Hill."¹¹⁰ Following the initial poem are 321 epitaphs, some of which are composite. *The New Spoon River* has no epilogue or "Spooniad." As in the earlier book there are interrelated epitaphs. The stories told through interrelated epitaphs are generally more artificial and have less flavor than those told in similar manner in *Spoon River Anthology*. "The Destinn Mausoleum" includes three short poems—"Father," "Mother," and "Mary"; they are entirely abstract and have no central episode. "The Seese Lot" contains four short epitaphs of Ferdinand, Charles, William, and Robert; it illustrates the parable of the sower and the seed, told in the Gospel of Mark, 4:3-20. Ferdinand was sown by the wayside; Charles was sown on stony ground; William was sown among thorns; and Robert was sown on good ground. The purport is that man is hedged by environment and fate. "Selden Snively," "Howard Snively," and "Ernest Snively" imitate the parable of the prodigal son, but they attempt to show that both sons were wronged by the father's unreasoned favoritism toward the prodigal. In "The Tombs of the Governors," another composite epitaph, the subjects are all governors—"Forgotten Governors," "Abraham Lincoln Pugsley," and "Elliott Hawkins Hammond"—a high percentage of governors for the community of Spoon River.

Spoon River Anthology contained poems called "The Unknown" and "Many Soldiers"; the sequel has corresponding poems entitled "The Unknown" and "Unknown Soldiers." As in the earlier volume, there are his-

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

¹¹⁰ *Supra*, pp. 2-3.

torical portraits. "Stephen A. Douglas" summarizes this Illinois statesman's political efforts. Jack Kelso, a hunter and fisherman who read Shakespeare and Burns, was a friend of Lincoln at New Salem. In his epitaph he reminisces about his own career and Lincoln's. The Kelso and Douglas epitaphs fit into the anthology because of Kelso's residence at New Salem and Douglas's connection with the whole central Illinois region.

Some people in *The New Spoon River* bear names made familiar by the 1915 collection, for example, Whedon, Williams, Rutledge, Clute, Hawkins, and Matlock. Rita Matlock Gruenberg is the granddaughter of Lucinda Matlock.¹¹¹ She traveled widely, had many experiences, showed inherited strength and courage, but life at last trapped her. Now she asks to become one with her grandmother.¹¹² Madison Matlock also has shown the mettle of the family; he is spiritually victorious, although outwardly unsuccessful.

The names used in the first *Anthology*, although often borrowed directly from actual Spoon River country people, were excellently chosen; they added to the realism of the book and seemed to be indigenous to the area. The sequel too has a wealth of names, many of which have all the piquancy of those in the earlier book, but others are too obviously artificial. A writer whose stories have happy endings is named Eva Hopewell; a citizen with definite ideas on Americanism, laws, and the Constitution is named Benjamin Franklin Hazard; a friend of strikers and rebels is named Robert Owen; the village switchboard operator is named Edith Bell.

Some of these later epitaphs refer to events in the first volume—to the burning of the courthouse, the failure of Rhodes' bank, sensational murders, and other important village occurrences. *The New Spoon River* itself has no great central episode comparable to the burning of the courthouse or the failure of the bank.

Remarks about book reviews in Masters' letters to Theodore Dreiser and Harriet Monroe show that he was aware of criticism.¹¹³ His reaction to reviews of *Spoon River Anthology* seems to have resulted in fewer epitaphs on sex, violent death, and sensational episodes. In general, the *New Spoon River* epitaphs are more speculative, abstract, philosophical, and political. Hatred of industrialism and materialism, hatred of what he considered narrow morality and bigoted religion, and other hatreds that were incidentally evident in the earlier book are now dominant motifs. Although the book has more unity, more purpose, it is less objective. Too many voices belong to Masters alone, not to the persons speaking, and there are more shadowy,

¹¹¹ *Supra*, pp. 12-13.

¹¹² The life of Madeline Masters, a sister of the poet, was probably the basis for this poem.

¹¹³ For example, a letter to Harriet Monroe, dated May 31, 1925, mentions that Masters considered her review of *The New Spoon River* judicious (the Monroe Collection).

undefined persons. Few poems from *The New Spoon River* stay in the memory as do "Lucinda Matlock" and others from *Spoon River Anthology*. In his first anthology, Masters had apparently used his best Spoon River country material.

In the 1920's the World War was one of Masters' major subjects. At least fifteen poems, some of them passionate and ironic, deal with it directly or indirectly. Another prominent subject was religion. "Jean Guerin" and "Andrew Winslow" are both unfavorable to organized, orthodox religion. "Ernest Waverley" tries to show both the falsity and the truth in the Bible. "Neville Hone" denounces "This Bible created and Bible dominated era."¹¹⁴ Other epitaphs, like "Heraclitus Procrustes" and "Sarah Dewitt," deal with the search for God.

Similarities between the two Spoon River books are more plentiful than are differences, as is evident when one examines episodes and themes. For example, "Joseph Wheelock" (*The New Spoon River*) has a story akin to that of "Hod Putt" (*Spoon River Anthology*). Hod imitated Indian traders and became a robber; Wheelock imitated capitalists and became a car-bandit. Both were executed for their crimes. Just as the artist's life was difficult in the Old Spoon River, so it is in the more modern town, as "Nicholas Koslowski," "Piersol Sutton," and "Ibbetson, The Plumber" illustrate. The epitaph of Father Malloy (*Spoon River Anthology*) was spoken by a friend; there are similar epitaphs in *The New Spoon River*. Someone unidentified wonders how Teresa Pashkowsky rose above Spoon River to fame as an opera singer; and Father Ambrose Murphy and John Burchard, the grog-keeper, compose the epitaph of William Low.

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Masters' ironic humor was still powerful, as "Perry Routson," "Douglas Strong," and "Lincoln Reeth" show. He still praised honesty, courage, magnanimity, and vitality. He had not lost his wealth of episode, his power for caustic denunciation, his ability to draw poignant sketches. He perhaps used more figures, some of them excellent. In "Herbert Nitze" he speculated on what would happen if there were no death and proved his image-making ability:

Kings! walking the automat, trying to pass old pennies;
Crusaders! chattering of dead centuries in the drug store.¹¹⁵

There are cliches and awkward inversions in the epitaphs of both volumes, but they are compensated by the condensed portraits. Many of these epitaphs are as incisive as the earlier ones. Nevertheless, when one finishes this book,

¹¹⁴ *The New Spoon River*, p. 327.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

he does not remember individual portraits but has instead a more definite knowledge of Masters' own opinions.

Spoon River Anthology has a certain position as a landmark in American literary history, and it contains poems of power and beauty. *The New Spoon River* is a lesser accomplishment. Yet both books helped prove the value of native American material handled freely. They told

supercilious detractors of America
As a land of aridity, without stories and myths,
Without romance, without epic material¹¹⁶

that there is material of universal significance in the rural communities of America.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 339.

¹¹⁷ The *Spoon River* books have had imitators, both humorous and serious. Louis Untermeyer, *Selected Poems and Parodies* (New York, 1935), pp. 268-269, contains a parody called "Edgar Lee Masters Discovers That 'Tommy Tucker' Danced for His Supper." August Derleth included in his *Selected Poems* (Prairie City, Illinois, 1944), pp. 201-235, a group of twenty-six sketches called "Sac Prairie People." These were the most obvious verse imitations.

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